

6. Philip the evangelist

8:1–40


Luke seems to have regarded Stephen and Philip as a pair. Both men belonged to the Seven, and so had social responsibilities in the Jerusalem church (6:5). Yet both were also preaching evangelists (6:10; 8:5), and both performed public signs and wonders (6:8; 8:6). In addition, Luke saw the ministry of both men as helping to pave the way for the Gentile mission. Stephen's contribution lay in his teaching about the temple, the law and the Christ, and in the effects of his martyrdom, while Philip's lay in his bold evangelization of the Samaritans and of an Ethiopian leader. For the Jews regarded the Samaritans as heretical outsiders and Ethiopia as 'the extreme boundary of the habitable world in the hot south'.¹


A notable feature of this chapter is the currency it gives to two distinctively Christian words for evangelism. Luke has already described the apostles as bearing witness to Christ, announcing (*katangellein*, 4:2) their message, devoting themselves to the ministry of the word of God, and teaching the people. But now he introduces the verb *kēryssō* (‘to herald’) in relation to Philip's proclamation of Christ (5), and popularizes the verb *euangelizō* (‘to bring good news’). The latter he has used once before (5:42), but in this chapter it occurs five times. Twice the object of the verb is the towns or villages evangelized (25, 40), while the other three times the object is the message itself, namely the good news of ‘the word’ (4), of ‘the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ’ (12), and simply of ‘Jesus’ (35). This is a salutary reminder that there can be no evangelism without an evangel, and that Christian evangelism presupposes the good news of Jesus Christ. Effective evangelism becomes possible only when the church recovers both the biblical gospel and a joyful confidence in its truth, relevance and power.

In the first four verses Luke sets the scene for the evangelistic exploits of Philip which he is about to narrate, beginning with this statement: *And Saul was there* (at Stephen's martyrdom), *giving approval to his death* (1a). Luke appears to be drawing attention to a threefold chain of cause and effect.

¹Hengel, p. 80.

First, Stephen's martyrdom brought *a great persecution ... against the church at Jerusalem*. It began *on that day*, the day of Stephen's death, and it *broke out* with the ferocity of a sudden storm (1b). True, not every inhabitant of the city was in opposition, for there were *godly men* (probably pious Jews rather than believers) who *buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him* (2), deploring the injustice of his death. They will have taken a considerable personal risk by thus identifying with Stephen. In contrast, Saul, who had approved of Stephen's stoning (1a, cf. 22:20), now *began to destroy the church* (3a). The verb *lumainō* expresses 'a brutal and sadistic cruelty'.² Making a *house-to-house* search for believers, *he dragged off men and women and put them in prison* (3b). Not only did he not spare the women, but he did not stop short of seeking—and securing—his victims' death (9:1; 22:4; 26:10). Saul of Tarsus had blood on his hands, for several others followed Stephen into martyrdom.

Secondly, the great persecution led to a great dispersion  : *all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria* (1c). Luke remembers how the risen Lord commanded his followers to be his witnesses 'in all Judea and Samaria' (1:8), as well as in Jerusalem; now he shows how the commission was fulfilled as a result of persecution. We are very familiar with the Jewish diaspora, which had led to the propagation of Judaism; 'this was the beginning of the Dispersion of the New Israel',³ which led to the dissemination of the gospel. Stephen's speech had been truly prophetic. Jerusalem and the temple now begin to fade from view, as Christ calls his people out and accompanies them. No blame is attached to the apostles for staying behind. Jerusalem would still for a while be the headquarters of the new Christian community, and they evidently saw it as their duty to remain there. Besides, it would have been dangerous for them to leave, even if the persecution was directed more against 'Hellenists' like Stephen than against 'Hebraists' like them.

Thirdly, if Stephen's martyrdom led to persecution, and the persecution to the dispersion, the dispersion now resulted in widespread evangelism  . The scattering of the Christians was followed by the scattering of the good seed of the gospel. For *those who had been scattered*, as they fled, far from going into hiding, or even maintaining a prudential silence, *preached the word wherever they went* (4). Up to this point it was the apos-

² Barclay, p. 64.

³ Neil, p. 119; *diaspeiro* is the word translated 'scattered' in both verses 1 and 4.

tles who had given the lead in evangelism, in defiance of the Sanhedrin's ban, violence and threats; now, however, as the apostles stayed in Jerusalem, it was the generality of believers who took up the evangelistic task. Not that they all became 'preachers' or 'missionaries' as a full-time vocation. The statement that they 'preached the word' is misleading; the Greek expression does not necessarily mean more than 'shared the good news'. Philip was soon to preach to the Samaritan crowds (6); it is better to think of the other refugees as lay witnesses ('nameless amateur missionaries'⁴).

What is plain is that the devil (who lurks behind all persecution of the church) overreached himself. His attack had the opposite effect to what he intended. Instead of smothering the gospel, persecution succeeded only in spreading it. As Bengel comments, 'the wind increases the flame'.⁵ An instructive modern parallel is what happened in 1949 in China when the National Government was defeated by the Communists. Six hundred and thirty-seven China Inland Mission missionaries were obliged to leave. It seemed a total disaster. Yet within four years 286 of them had been redeployed in South-East Asia and Japan, while the national Christians in China, even under severe persecution, began to multiply and now total thirty or forty times the number they were when the missionaries left (the exact figures are not known).

Having set the scene in the first four verses of the chapter, Luke goes on to give us two examples of early Christian evangelism, in both of which Philip was the chief actor. He may have obtained the facts from the lips of Philip himself, for about twenty years later he stayed in his home in Caesarea (21:8).

⁴ Green, *Evangelism*, p. 180; cf. p. 208.

⁵ Bengel, p. 585.